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ABSTRACT

The authors propose that a principal, instead of making all decisions himself, should convene faculty, staff, and student groups to help bring conflict into the open and to work on organizational problems systematically. This "team-leader" role assumes that team members are intelligent, competent, and want to perform well; and that an open organizational climate with high trust and esprit facilitates group problem solving procedures. (RA)

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THE PRINCIPAL AS CONVENER OF
ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

by

Richard A. Schmuck
and
Jack E. Nelson

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The authors have demonstrated success in working with school faculties and administrators to effect planned change. Schmuck and Nelson call attention to the "Organizational Problem-Solving Process" on page 12. Additional information about this process can be obtained by contacting the authors at:

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The principal as a convenor of organizational change is appropriate reading for Colorado educators. We think that it is also a reading "must" for Colorado superintendents and school board members who strongly influence the principals' role.

The Editor

James Rose

THE PRINCIPAL AS CONVENER OF ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEM SOLVING

by

Richard A. Schmuck and Jack E. Nelson

A new role for the principal is beginning to appear in American education--a role that brings a new sort of educational leadership to building staffs. It is emerging as a vehicle for coping with rapidly increasing sizes of buildings and districts. It responds to a changing educational culture, one that is striving to become more and more democratic. The new role involves convening staff members for problem solving and group decision making.

Increases in size have led to more complex role structures and organizational procedures in schools. At the district level, assistant superintendents, directors, and specialists have been added; while in buildings, staffs have been supplemented with vice-principals, counselors, and resource teachers. Even the roles of department head and area coordinator have broadened, and demands for more differentiated roles within buildings are constantly gaining momentum. For the principal, this has meant a lengthened vertical hierarchy, creating more distance between himself and the superintendent on the one hand, and between his classroom teachers and himself on the other. Although many specialized roles have been added to school districts, principals still are spending increasingly larger periods of off-duty time on the job.¹

These alterations in the organizational complexity of schools have been accompanied by increased militancy of teachers. The 1960's brought a rapid increase of teacher strikes. Williams² claimed that 80 percent of the man-hours lost in education due to work stoppages between 1940 and 1968 occurred during 1967-68. In that academic year 114 teachers' strikes took place, accounting for more than one-third of all the strikes over a 28-year period.

All indications nationally point to even more strikes during the 1970's.

Teacher militancy has led to collective bargaining which, in turn, has resulted in teachers circumventing principals and specialists to negotiate for salaries, other benefits, and modifications in curriculum. More and more teachers negotiate directly with their board on matters that once were primarily the responsibility of the superintendent or principal. Even so, the day-to-day grievances of teachers continue to be addressed primarily to their building principal.

A New Role

In the October, 1969 edition of the National Association of Secondary School Principal's Bulletin, we described an organizational training program with a junior high school that has led us to devise a new role for the principal. The first author of this paper was the leader of the organizational training team in that project; the second author was the principal of the school. The role functions within a team of staff members to broaden the locus of decision making to make use of the strengths and resources of the faculty. The principal as a single role taker makes fewer decisions on his own compared with a traditional role-model. Mostly, he guides groups through problem solving and stimulates all members to participate actively.

It is important to point out that we do not have in mind a human-relations approach where people relate merely in pleasant and non-confrontative ways. On the contrary, in our conception and experience, the principal performs as the facilitator of a team, or as the convener of several groups in interaction, to help bring conflict into the open and to work on organizational problems systematically. Often, this role leads to uncomfortable

interactions and to difficult interpersonal confrontations. The emphasis we place on the role is to energize and systematize group problem solving and decision making.

Several assumptions about the ways schools operate underlie this suggested role. First, we assume that the organizational processes of a school, especially those involving the use of staff resources, set the stage for successful instruction and innovation. Second, we think that many principals have attempted to explain away the major problems of their schools by emphasizing the inferior nature of resources instead of focusing on the process of using resources. It is true that the quality of resources, whether they are competent students, effective teachers, or contemporary curriculum materials, is important. Nevertheless, more attention should be placed by principals on improving the group processes in their schools. Our third assumption is that it is the interaction of students, teachers, and curriculum materials in all their various relationships that determine the efficient use of the school's resources.

From our point of view, the school is more than simply the total of the individuals' resources and the curriculum materials. The staff as a group has different characteristics from those of its individual members; and, if it is effectively managed, it may be more productive than would be expected from a simple summing up of individual resources. To the extent that the principal is able to work efficiently to maximize production from whatever resources he is given, we would declare him to be an effective convener of organizational problem solving.

The new role's cognitive components should comprise an understanding of McGregor's theory of motivation.³ His Theory Y assumed that persons are

curious and active, that they want to perform well, and that being stimulated by others at work can be very satisfying. McGregor pointed out that many leaders in organizations hold quite different assumptions which he labeled Theory X. Theory X assumes that persons must be prodded to perform and that people must be strictly controlled if they are to pursue organizational goals. Typically, Theory X encourages unilateral decisions by superordinates and one-way communication in contrast to two-way. Theory Y, on the other hand, encourages a participative leadership style. It assumes that persons should be granted leeway and freedom to organize themselves; and, if they are guided through such an open climate, that they will make maximum use of their mutual resources.

Principals taking the new role should also understand that emotional experiences can become problems when desires for achievement, affiliation, and power are frustrated. Typical emotional frustrations are feelings of inferiority, worthlessness, being "put down;" loneliness, betrayal, lack of interest, and dullness; these feelings, in turn, prevent persons from making maximum use of their potential whether emotional, cognitive, or behavioral. It is true that a principal cannot manage his school so that all emotional frustrations are eliminated. Nevertheless, with skills in group facilitation, it is possible to bring about organizational norms and procedures that will mobilize emotional states for productive ends. Feelings of achievement can be harnessed when teachers have a clear concept of their goals. Affiliative feelings can be gratified through building cohesive units in which teachers find friendliness and the reciprocal exchange of support and warmth. Feelings having to do with power can be satisfied through the principal's encouraging influence at all levels.

Such a dispersion of influence will facilitate the open expression of frustration.

The new role also should include information about group techniques for increasing the flow of communication. One technique useful in face-to-face meetings is the so-called fishbowl. When using this procedure, one group sits surrounded by another. Usually, the outside group observes the insiders, the outside observers having been provided with particular categories to guide their observation. A variation of the fishbowl, also useful, is a formation in which two or three empty chairs are left in the inside group and members of the outside group are invited to enter when they choose to communicate something to the insiders. For additional ideas about innovations in group leadership techniques, see Miles⁴, Schmuck and Runkel⁵, and Langmeyer, Schmuck, and Runkel.⁶

Performing effectively as the convener of problem-solving places new demands on the principal. Benevolence and warm paternalism are no longer virtues. Rather, empathic understanding is required along with willingness to enter into uncomfortable confrontations. The communication skills of paraphrasing, describing behavior, describing own feelings, perception checking, summarizing, and gatekeeping are important behaviors to establish constructive openness during problem solving.⁷ Unilateral decision making is not usually appropriate, but openness about one's own feelings engendered by the role of principal is needed to strengthen trust with the staff.

When teachers are confronted with behaviors of a principal that are at variance with what they have come to expect, it is quite understandable that they should be distrustful. Much of their experience has taught

them that authority figures not only do not behave democratically and trustfully, but that in many instances they should not do so. Our interpretation of teachers' behavior is that they initially react to a less controlling principal as a phoney or as "playing a game" to protect themselves from the risks implicit in potential engagement on more democratic terms. It is important for the principal taking the new role to persist in it over a long period of time to gain the confidence of his staff.

Perhaps the most important behavior necessary to carry out the new role effectively has to do with guiding group problem solving. It seems fair to assume that most principals and teachers have been trained to take positions of high control and to direct single-handedly the activities of the staff or of a group of students. But they have not been trained to work collaboratively with adult professionals.

Problem-solving skills, in themselves, are not difficult to learn. Many principals have at least a passing acquaintance with the procedures of problem-definition, data collection, brainstorming, examining alternatives, and so forth. At issue for the principal are the operational and behavioral implications of the concept of collaboration for problem solving. These are, minimally, the willingness to engage on a level of mutual influence, the willingness to expose vested interests, and an active concern for organizational goals. In other words, though behavioral skills are very important, the attitudinal correlates of these skills are critical. At the very least, this new role of the principal must include the sincere willingness to share power.

Support for the New Role

Research in social psychology lends support to the role of the principal as a convener of problem solving. Findings reveal that it is possible to create relationships among individuals comprising a face-to-face group so that the group exhibits properties different from those properties observed in typical committees, staff groups, or task forces in everyday organizational life.⁸ The more effective groups have leaders who allow for greater participation, wider initial divergence of expressed judgments, and greater acceptance of diverse decisions.⁹ Moreover, effective leaders have been shown to encourage minority opinions and conflict to a greater extent than less effective leaders.¹⁰ Also, it has been shown that group participants with little influence over a decision not only fail to contribute their resources to the decision but usually are less likely to carry out the decision when action is required.¹¹

Evidence comes directly from research on schools also. Gross and Herriott examined the consequences of the professional leadership exhibited by elementary school principals on the operation of their schools. To measure the effects of the leadership behavior of principals on their staffs, the researchers examined the relationship between the principal's scores on a measure of Executive Professional Leadership (EPL) and three characteristics of schools that are widely accepted as meaningful criteria of effectiveness: staff morale, the professional performance of teachers, and the students' learning. Gross and Herriott found positive and significant relationship between EPL and each of these three variables. EPL was defined as the efforts of a principal of a school to conform to a definition of his role that stresses his obligation to improve the quality of the

performance of his staff. This role is in many ways similar to that of the convener for problem solving.

The results of the study described in the NASSP Bulletin in which the principal was trained in the role of convener of problem solving showed that the principal gained significantly in his EPL scores after the training. Much of the training in that project was aimed at increasing two-way communication of feelings between the principal and his teachers. The training also focused on increasing the effectiveness of the Principal's Advisory Committee as a team and on increasing communicative linkages between the principal and the teachers by direct training in communicative skills and problem solving.

The studies by Gross and Herriott and by Schmuck and Runkel both tell us that effectiveness in problem solving on performance is likely to be improved by increasing a professional peer relationship between the principal and his staff. Both studies emphasized trust-building, authenticity, and genuineness in the behavior of the principal.¹² Watkins¹³ clearly showed that principals who maintained close and informal relationships with teachers also had a school in which there was an open climate, high esprit, and high trust. Finally, Chesler, Schmuck, and Lippitt¹⁴ showed that principals who had innovating staffs were tuned to their teachers' feelings and values and were better informed about their informal relationships.

Examples of New Role

Although the role of principal as convener of organizational problem solving is just beginning to take shape as a viable role, a few examples of this role in action have been documented.

(1) In a junior high school, we helped form the Principal's Advisory Committee into more of a problem-solving group. The principal served as the group facilitator. The group met bimonthly for one hour before classes began. At the committee's request an additional 6:30 A.M. breakfast meeting lasting 2-1/2 hours was scheduled the last Friday of each month. Members very rarely missed these meetings. When an area chairman could not attend, he asked a member of his subject area to take his place. On several occasions, general faculty members were invited to attend these meetings; typically two or three would appear and participate. This Advisory Committee facilitated organizational problem solving in the school in several ways. The principal acted to help decisions, to keep communication flowing, and to help less active teachers to participate.

(2) In an elementary school, we helped the staff form into a multi-unit structure. The principal formed a leadership team with five unit leaders (master teachers), a curriculum resource librarian, and a counselor. Each unit leader formed a team with three or four other teachers and several aides (either student teachers from a nearby university or volunteer adults from the community). No self-contained classrooms existed in the building. The principal served as a convener for the leadership group which, in turn, integrated the instructional efforts of the various units. Key decisions for new instructional strategies were made by the units, and innovations in overall curriculum and organizational policies were decided upon by the leadership group. Power, in general, was placed more in the hands of teams of teachers. The principal kept the whole communication process active and clear.

(3) In an experimental high school, the principal became concerned that low achieving students, primarily a group of culturally disadvantaged Black students, were not advancing very well in the basic skills (especially reading and writing). He decided to hold a meeting with a group of Black students to discuss how they saw the school. Most of these students reported that they liked the freedom in the school, but they also wanted to learn to read and write so that jobs would be easier to get. Unfortunately, the teachers in this experimental school wanted to teach problem solving and systematic inquiry, mostly in lieu of teaching remedial reading. The principal was able to work as a convener of problem solving by arranging for the Black students to give their feedback directly to the relevant teachers. He set up a meeting and used several techniques described elsewhere.¹⁵

(4) In another high school, the principal has decided to take a leave of absence for one year to go to graduate school at the University of Oregon to learn skills of consulting. With the permission of his staff, he will serve as an organizational consultant to his own school during that year. He hopes to help the staff to organize itself for organizational decision making so that the teachers and specialists will become involved in more and more decisions in small teams. He wants to construct the role of the principal as convener of organizational problem solving.

Implementing the New Role

The introduction of a more democratic, team-oriented, teacher decision-making structure calls for very direct and decisive action on the part of the principal. He must be ready to initiate the sort of

organizational process he believes will yield the most productive results; the ultimate responsibility for decisions in buildings lies with him. The special effect of the new role we have been discussing, however, results from the principal's facilitation of problem solving by others and from his restraint from doing jobs that might be done by others closer to the point of application.

Our assessment of the existing role indicates that there are many opportunities for the principal to be a convener. He can organize a formal decision-making body that best fits his style. It may be charged with topics ranging from spending discretionary funds to the best use of rooms. Through such a group, a large faculty can be represented effectively, and knowledge of a problem can be widely shared well in advance of the time action is to be accomplished. In this setting, the principal does not need to be the "boss," but can assume the role of facilitator. A regularly scheduled bimonthly meeting has proved to be effective.

Another opportunity for the principal as convener can almost always be found among the chief administrative jobs of the school. In a weekly meeting, information concerning the general management of the school can be shared such as information from the central office, desires from the faculty, and information from informal channels. By determining the best solutions, many problems involving poor communications on the staff can be avoided. A second regular half-hour meeting can be used for rapid collection of up-to-the-minute news for the bulletin. Pertinent information about the next weeks' events can get to the total staff before their departure for the weekend.

Another opportunity occurs early in the fall. At that time, in regularly scheduled meetings, the principal and first-year teachers can explore their unique concerns and problems. The principal can use this opportunity for open discussion of school policy, generation of mutual respect and trust, and a sensing of potential difficulties.

The principal can employ volunteer interest groups within the faculty to do a great deal of pre-planning for curricular innovation. He should not overlook ad hoc groups to work on special problems such as orientation of new students, problems unique to scheduling parental visits, and public relations with the community. He can contribute his expertise to these groups, as well as that of district consultants, curriculum specialists, and other resources available. Problems relating to budget, personnel, and space can be discussed before concrete proposals are formulated. These groups should be convened in the early spring or fall to meet budget deadlines for the following fiscal year.

In many of these team sessions the principal can facilitate the performance of the group and implement his role as a convener by using an organizational problem-solving process. Space does not allow us to include detailed description of this seven stage process, however, mimeographed materials are available by writing to the authors at CASEA.

Possible Consequences of the New Role

Once the principal uses the problem-solving process and once a new decision-making pattern has been established, a number of consequences can be predicted that are not necessarily related to the new role itself. For example, after the principal has shared power with others on some important

matters, he cannot easily retrieve it by fiat. Thus, while he makes the decision initially to share his power, it is typically risky for him to reverse his stance; the probable result is organizational stress and a lowered trust from teachers.

Another consequence of the new role is an increase in the amount of time that will be consumed in solving problems and making decisions. Problems that the principal may have decided on his own in a short time may take hours of the group's deliberation. This can be frustrating and the principal must be able to deal with his own frustration and that of his teachers. The willingness of the principal to tolerate this increase in time may even sometimes seem to the teachers to corroborate their fear that he is "playing a game" and is only waiting for them to fail. The principal must be able to suffer through these periods.

Changing the formal structure also has consequences for the informal structure. For example, a danger is that decision-making teams working with the principal can become "inner circles." The members have easier access to power than the rest of the faculty. This suggests that unless this development is foreseen and plans made to deal with it, a large group of staff members may drift toward the periphery. The main issues of importance seem to be to (1) insure a free flow of data about suspicious and negative feelings, (2) diagnose the nature of the problems that appear, and (3) initiate appropriate actions to resolve problem situations.

The difficulties listed above are ever present, but they can be met with determination and skill on the part of the principal and his advisors. It is our belief, backed by the studies and experiences already cited, that greater use of the human resources throughout the school and a greater

commitment by the staff to the school's goals will emerge when the principal acts regularly to convene problem-solving activities and makes use of objective problem-solving procedures.

FOOTNOTES

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